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# *'Lower than a Snake's Belly': Discursive Constructions of Dignity and Heroism in Low-Status Garbage Work*

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# ‘Lower than a Snake’s Belly’: Discursive Constructions of Dignity and Heroism in Low-Status Garbage Work

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**Abstract** In this paper, we consider how dignity is discursively constructed in the context of work dominated by physicality and dirt. Based on semi-structured interviews with garbage workers, our analysis considers how the deprivations they experience are cast through discourses intended to construct their individual and collective worth. We consider the manner in which dignity maybe denied to such workers through popular repudiations of individuality and status. We demonstrate how this positioning arises from contact with physical dirt, and associations with socially dirty work based on ascriptions of servility, abuse and ambivalence. We go on to consider how garbage workers respond to this positioning through discourses of ‘everyday heroism’. Heroism is evoked through three inter-related narratives that speaks to a particular type of masculinity. The first takes the form of a classic process of reframing and recalibration through which workers not only renegotiate their public position and status, but also point to the inherent value to be had in working with dirt as part of that which we identify as a process of ‘affirmation’. The second narrative arises from the imposition of favourable social and occupational comparisons that effectively elevate garbage collectors’ social position. The third discourse—and

previously unobserved in respect of garbage work—centres on paternalistic practices of care. Combined, these discourses disrupt the generally held view that dirty work is antithetical to heroism and wounds dignity.

**Keywords** Autonomy · Dignity · Dirty work · Esteem · Garbage collectors · Hierarchy · Heroism occupation · Stratification

## Introduction

Although the concept of workplace dignity has been labelled ‘an elusive subject’ (Bolton 2007, p. 7) from a Western perspective there is broad consensus around terms such as reasonable pay and terms and conditions, equality, esteem, worth, autonomy and respect (Lucas et al. 2013). Berg and Frost (2005), for example, conceptualise dignity through the three dimensions of economic security, fair treatment and intrinsically satisfying work. Hodson (2001, p. 3) contends that dignity pertains to establishing self-worth, self-respect and an appreciation of the respect of others, while Bolton writes that:

Dignity in labour via interesting and meaningful work with a degree of responsible autonomy and recognised social esteem and respect may be understood as *dignity in work*; structures and practices that offer equality of opportunity, collective and individual voice, safe and healthy working conditions, secure terms of employment and just rewards would lead to workers attaining *dignity at work* (2007, p. 8, original italics).

Sayer (2007a) also highlights how the bivalent character of workplace dignity is potentially important given the

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instrumental nature of the employment relationship. How employees are treated at work will therefore go some way to establishing whether they experience dignity. Accordingly, where workers experience mismanagement and abuse, overwork, constraints on their autonomy and limited employee involvement then dignity will be denied (Hodson 2001). The relational character of such denials is evident in the case of bullying (Vega and Comer 2005) which Lopez et al. describe as ‘a process of demeaning the dignity of the other in order to protect or elevate one’s own status and identity’ (2009, p. 6).

Denials of dignity need not, however, be so extreme or dramatic. Ackroyd (2007) contends that when voluntariness, self-organisation and commitment are absent, when discipline is not self-imposed, and money is the primary motivation, then dignity is likely to be denied. For Berg and Frost (2005) low wages, physically demanding work, and limited resources are also negatively related to perceived dignity. Sayer (2007a) suggests that not being taken seriously and doing demeaning work can undermine dignity. In the context of these conceptualisations of dignity, we therefore consider the experiences and sense of self-worth of those engaged in ‘dirty work’, understood as that which is physically disgusting, degrading, morally suspect, unwanted or taboo (Hughes 1951). Dirty work is, by definition, something that is said to wound one’s dignity (Hughes 1958). Associated with low-status occupations, it is generally assumed that such work is done by those with few choices (Jervis, 2001). It is the work of the janitor in Hughes’s (1958) study of occupations or, as examined here, that of the modern day garbage collector. It is work which is said to ‘run counter to the more heroic of our moral conceptions’ (Hughes 1958, p. 50).

Following on from related occupational studies by Simpson et al. (2014a), Slutskaya et al. (2016) and Hughes et al. (2017), we explore the experiences of what is perhaps the least outwardly ‘heroic’ job: garbage collection. Where doctors and firefighters are associated with saving lives and soldiers speak to bravery, the garbage collector is charged with handling the waste of other people. Where other low-status occupations resist and accept the ambiguity of their identity through appeals to professionalism, empowerment, skill or a sense of social or moral superiority to those further down the chain (see, for example, Grandy and Mavin’s (2014) account of ‘exotic’ dancers) it is unclear who is ‘below’ the rubbish collector. In this sense, garbage collectors remain a group worthy of study in occupational terms.

In this paper, we are interested in whether and how garbage collectors construct a sense of dignity in the face of the challenges posed by low-status dirty work (Ghidina 1992). Analysing talk from semi-structured interviews conducted with 51 garbage collectors, we assert that not

only do such workers experience dignity they also construct narratives of ‘everyday heroism’. In asserting this, we identify three discourses that pertain to dignity. First, ‘affirmation’, which is based upon declaring work and identities as positive and valid in the provision of a socially valuable public good. Second ‘hierarchic esteem’ wherein garbage collectors affirm differential status in relation to both outsiders and insiders. In a new contribution, we note that this construction is subtly different to ‘hierarchies’ observed elsewhere in so far as hierarchic esteem is not only established through the denigration of those ‘below’ oneself (as observed in Grandy 2008) but, also through the projection of heroic status by lower occupational members towards their occupational seniors. In this sense, ‘hierarchic esteem’ is often a positive ascription of status that resides in commending rather than condemning the ‘other’. Third, a sense of heroism is identified in the narration of paternalistic practices of care centred on explicit claims to improving people’s lives on an individual as well as collective basis. These discourses combine to describe the type of dignified and even heroic masculinity normally associated with higher status occupations.

The paper is structured as follows. In the next section of the paper, we discuss dignity and dirty work, both generally and specifically within the context of garbage collectors. We then provide a description of our research method and sample, before presenting our findings and analysis. The discussion following this focuses on how the garbage collectors can be denied dignity, before proceeding to argue that the three discourses of affirmation, hierarchic esteem and paternalistic care show that they actively claim dignity in and at work. In the final section, we consider the wider implications for constructing dignity in work.

## Dignity and Taint in a Dirty Context

As noted above, dirty work can be viewed as that which ‘may be simply physically disgusting. It may be a symbol of degradation, something that wounds one’s dignity. Finally, it may be dirty work in that it in some way goes counter to the more heroic of our moral conceptions’ (Hughes 1951, p. 319). It is from this that Ashforth and Kreiner (1999) popularised the distinction between the physical, social and moral taints that arise from dirt and dirty work and to which others have added emotional taint (McMurray and Ward 2014). The taints associated with doing dirty work can in turn lead to those doing such work being stigmatised or marked as contaminated in some way by their contact with dirt. For example, the work of exotic dancers may be said to be morally tainted by what others sees as the sin or dubious virtue associated with their work (Grandy and Mavin 2012). The domestic worker may be



socially tainted through their servile relationship to clients and employers (Bosmans et al. 2016). The work of butchers (Meara 1974; Slutskaya et al. 2012), funeral directors (Thompson 1991) and (as considered below) garbage workers may result in physical taint as a consequence of contamination from or association with effluence, grime or death. In each case, the proximity of the worker to dirt makes interaction with them undesirable in the mind of the public. There is a fear that contacts with these 'agents' of dirty work will literally or symbolically contaminate us (Hughes 1962). As a consequence the dirty worker is seen as flawed, blemished or devalued in various degrees (Kreiner et al. 2006). Their work and identity are associated with the very terms that denote an absence of dignity: 'shame, stigma, humiliation, lack of recognition or being mistrusted or taken for granted' (Sayer 2007b, p. 567).

As Grandy and Mavin (2014) contend, dignity is difficult to obtain in the course of doing dirty work and considerable effort is required to attain dignity. However, though it is difficult to attain dignity it is not impossible. By way of example, Meara (1974) describes the honour-conferring practices shared by Turkish and American butchers. Specifically, Meara (1974) demonstrated that through their physical bearing the butchers were able to experience honour based on their knife skills, their physical ability to withstand the cold and in being able to overcome various dangers associated with the job. Honour was, however, principally a manifestation of high autonomy and discretion. As she wrote '[I]t is heteronomy rather than dirty work which poses the greatest threat to their honour' (1974, p. 279). Similarly, studies of UK meat-trade workers found that these workers could experience dignity in the face of heavily physically tainted work. For example, Ackroyd and Crowdy (1990) reported on the slaughterhouse workers generating esteem from their activities that required skill, strength and endurance from their daily contact with the powerful pollutants of blood and meat. Simpson et al.'s (2014b) study reports butchers finding dignity in the authenticity of their work and the distinctiveness of being in a shared trade that provided strong identification, pride and a sense of shared-belonging amongst them.

Such studies intimate that it is possible for workers who engage in lower-status dirty work to experience dignity. Even so, butchering is a trade with a defined set of skills. In London, it is represented by one of the oldest guilds, namely, The Worshipful Company of Butchers granted a Royal Charter in 1605 with claims to association going back to 975 AD. There is no such association for garbage collectors, and there is little public recognition of trade or skill. Instead, it is a job where dirt and physicality dominate. For example, in relation to refuse collectors, the

physical demands of the job are evident in the fact that the job principally involves the lifting and/or pulling of heavy bins (Slutskaya et al. 2016). Given this it is unsurprising that refuse collectors experience a range of fatal and non-fatal hazards, including musculoskeletal, respiratory, gastrointestinal and hearing complaints (Kuijer and Frings-Dressen 2004; Garrido et al. 2015). When we add to this the job's proximity to garbage, foul odours, noxious spray, unpleasant sights and working in sometimes difficult weather conditions, it is unsurprising it regularly ranks as one of the least favoured jobs to undertake (Gibb 2003).

Following on from Walzer's point that, 'dirt, waste, and garbage has been the object of disdain and avoidance in just about every human society' (1984, p. 174), the work of the garbage collector has long been stigmatised. Zimring (2004) goes as far as to suggest that workers in the US waste industry have been maligned since the industry's inception and still receive little respect. Following Douglas (1966), he notes how their handling of waste breaks deep social taboos around cleanliness and order, arguing that they are viewed as not just physically dirty, but also morally degraded. In arguing that they are still marginalised he writes that 'in the twentieth-first century, the industry still bears the stigma associated with its immigrant and waste-handling origins' (Zimring 2004, p. 96). Rich (1996) in his examination of Detroit refuse collectors also noted public indifference and claimed that the limited dignity that garbage collectors nurture is largely the result of them, out of desperation, doing a job most people do not wish to do. In his focus on the ethical problems which arose during their rounds, he also contended that the limited workplace participation enjoyed by these workers was the result of an arbitrary and arrogant management, 'deemed most acceptable when workers are considered the wretches of the workplace: garbage collectors' (1996, p. 201).

Finally, it is worth noting that Perry (1998) provides a counter-narrative as his work shows that the form of ownership could positively impact on the experience of garbage workers. In his ethnography based upon the San Franciscan Sunset Scavenger Company, a worker cooperative set-up in 1920 and composed mainly of Italian-Americans, he argues that worker ownership ensured better pay, greater job security and honour in work. Worker ownership he argues also enabled the refuse collectors to experience dignity. However, beyond this ability to experience dignity, Perry (1998) also clearly showed that their work involved significant risks was physically dirty and considered of low status.

These findings give rise to a number of questions in respect of this most lowly of occupations. How does self-esteem arise when you are not a higher occupation or a trade? What is the source of dignity when you are not part of an owning collective or recognised trade? How do

workers narrate issues of choice and respect when they are fully aware that they are one of the few groups of people who still get their hands dirty in a post-industrial labour market dominated by the service economy? In short, what if any dignity is to be found or enacted when you are considered ‘the wretches of the workplace’ (Rich 1996, p. 201) or as Perry labelled them, ‘the archetype of the so-called dirty work occupations’ (1998, p. xvii) and what can this tell us about the construction of dignity at work more broadly?

## Research Methods and Sample

While there has been growing interest in the labour of garbage collectors (most recently Simpson et al. 2014a; Slutskaya et al. 2016; Hughes et al. 2017) particularly in relation to conceptions of dirt, they are, as Ashworth and Kreiner (1999) originally pointed out, a relatively under-explored occupational grouping. As compared to the volumes written on middle managers, company executives and organisational leaders, there is a nascent literature on garbage workers. Organisation studies have instead long been preoccupied by the lives and experiences of organisational elites (Silverman 1970) thinking nothing of repeatedly returning to similar informants in the exploration of classic management issues. Accordingly, we would argue that, not only is there room for more research into the lives of garbage workers, there is also value in extending our understanding of the ways in which these archetypal dirty workers construct identities and enact dignity—this includes tackling the classics issue (as identified by Hughes 1958) of exploring themes that cut across occupational types and hierarchies.

In examining the question as to whether and how garbage workers experience dignity in the context of work that has many physical deprivations, taint and low social status, our discussion is based on data from semi-structured interviews conducted with refuse collectors and street cleaners employed by a local government authority in the North East of England. As is common in the UK, the refuse collectors’ work patterns are often referred to as ‘job and knock’, ‘task and finish’ or ‘job and finish’. These are defined by McIntosh and Broderick as ‘a non-contractual, semi-informal arrangement enshrined in notions of custom and practice which meant that once work tasks were completed workers could go’ (1996, p. 415). While this could create access problems we were able to interview the refuse collectors because the organisation required staff to complete an online equality and diversity training programme. As the refuse collectors worked Monday to Thursday, in order to undertake the training small groups were paid to come into work on four consecutive Fridays. During these training

sessions, we interviewed 31 garbage collectors who went from door to door emptying the bins of houses and businesses. During these training days, we conducted a further 20 interviews with garbage collectors charged with street cleaning. Unlike the refuse collectors, they did not work a ‘task and finish’ system, instead they had fixed hours between 7.00 a.m. and 3.30 p.m. Any weekend working was classified as overtime and paid a higher hourly rate. Taken together, these 51 workers comprised approximately 85% of the public sector workforce charged with garbage collection in their particular area.

On average the interviews lasted around 45 min. All interviewees were white males from a semi-rural locality. Their length of service varied from a couple of years to 30 years. The refuse collectors comprised ten wagon drivers (*D*), seventeen loaders (*L*) responsible for emptying the wheelie bins, one side-loader (*SL*) who collected large household and business items, two waste advisors (*WA*) who emptied contaminated recycling bins and the refuse collector supervisor. The work of the drivers and loaders was organised on the basis of alternate weeks collecting household rubbish and recycled waste. Household waste was contained in green ‘wheelie’ bins, while the recycled waste was placed into a blue ‘wheelie’ bin. The former was viewed as the harder, heavier and therefore more physically demanding week. The side-loader and waste advisors responded to calls and requests from management and members of the public. In terms of the street cleaners, they comprised one supervisor, seven scarab drivers and twelve labourers. Labourers could do a variety of tasks including litter picking, road sweeping and waste response. Litter picking, either working alone or in a team, involved picking up any litter or debris typically using long-arm litter picker sticks. Sweeping usually involved working within a team that included a scarab driver (small mechanised road sweepers) into whose path debris was swept. Waste response involved emptying the 300 dog bins across the five zones that the street cleaners worked, as well dealing with ‘fly tipping’ (illegal dumping of rubbish) and cleaning graffiti.

As the research was concerned with whether the garbage collectors experienced workplace dignity, the interview questions sought to find out their views about their employer, their relations with management, the nature of their job, what they most liked and disliked about the job, what their relationship with the public was like, the degree to which they thought others valued their work and how they viewed the public. Examples of open interview questions included: What do you like/dislike most about the job? How would you describe the relationship with your managers? How do you think the public view you? What is your view of the public? We also asked closed questions which we followed up by asking the rationale for

their answer. Examples of these included: Do you think the job is valued by others (why, in what ways, can you give me examples)? Do you think others understand the job you do (what makes you say that, why do you think that is)?

The above questions were drawn from the literatures on dirty work and dignity and linked to constituent elements of each in order to hear whether interviewees spoke about physical taints related to their job and whether they experienced dignity associated experiences such as respect, esteem and autonomy. Throughout the interviews, we avoided using the term dignity and, as far as possible, also avoided using such terms as dirty and stigma since we wanted to hear whether these emerged unprompted. All the interviews were recorded, transcribed and coded in relation to key notions associated with dirty work and dignity.

The coding involved breaking the transcripts into units that contained talk that was considered relevant to the concepts of dirty work and dignity. For example, in relation to the former, this included explicit use of words and phrases that related to the job being dirty and tainted. This included their talk about dirt, the physical demands of the job and other peoples' perspective on them and their job, as well as public interactions centred on rudeness, stigma or gratitude. Analyse of such talk gave rise to key themes on the 'denial of dignity' in respect of physical dirt and public judgement (see below) and three distinct, if overlapping, discourses pertaining to the construction of dignity in respect of affirming, hierarchic esteem and paternalistic care. Table 1 provides an illustration as to how we coded, focusing on the issue of 'hierarchic esteem' based on selective social comparison. Repeated reading and coding of the text allowed us to establish the second-order themes (e.g. employment status, physical capital, employment conditions and intra-occupational esteem) which were built on first-order codes (e.g. self-reliance, self-esteem, limited supervision, and relative skills) that tied directly back to specific interview extracts (see Table 1). All such themes were reworked and reanalysed as part of the writing and review process until they coalesced as coherent narratives. Each theme is considered below starting with denials of dignity.

## Denials of Dignity

It might seem obvious to report that the job of a garbage collector contains many possible denials of dignity that could amount to an identity threat (Ashforth et al. 2007). However, at least in terms of their workplace experiences, when asked about workplace structures and practices their responses were predominantly positive. For example, workers expressed generally positive views about working for their local government employer, noting that the pay,

terms and conditions, holidays, pension, work patterns and job security were good. In Hodson's (2001) terms, managerial abuse seemed minimal and there was a broadly favourable view of the local management. Overall, the employment relationship itself did not seem to diminish the dignity of the worker. Garbage collectors therefore appeared to experience what we earlier noted as dignity *at* work (Bolton 2007). Dignity was, however, threatened *in* work (Bolton 2007)—in regard to physical dirt, public interaction and attributions of low intelligence.

All workers recognised that there were aspects of their job tasks that were inherently unpleasant. For example, one of the waste advisor's said his job involved attending to 'disgusting bins and houses' while a street cleaner (SC18) talked about how 'you've got dog mess, you've got dead animals on the road, people throwing stuff down, you've just got to pick it up and get on with it and empty the bins. It's a smelly, dirty job some days'. Another summed it up as 'I mean it's a dirty job, you know, it's not exactly glamorous going around picking rubbish up off the streets' (SC3). The work of garbage collectors and street cleaners was therefore characterised by an inevitable and persistent encounter with physical dirt.

The stigmatising effects of being associated with physical dirt were reflected in how interviewees talked about the behaviour of members of the public when in close physical proximity to workers. Individuals recalled how members of the public would hold their noses when walking past the refuse wagon, while one worker recounted that even his own daughter would lower her head and not speak to him when he was on the garbage wagon. In these ways, public ascriptions of the nature, status and worth of garbage collectors spoke to stigmatised identities: to individuals that were to be avoided and ignored precisely because of their physical proximity to dirt. When refuse collectors were not being ignored because of their proximity to physical dirt, they often instead experienced verbal abuse. Abuse centred on members of the public 'f'ing and blinding [swearing] at you' (L8) when, for example, garbage collectors declined to empty contaminated recycle bins or take material left by the roadside. In this sense, workers were being cast and castigated as errant servants charged with cleaning and removing the dirt of others. Concerned that negative feedback would not impact on their employment status; the response of individual workers to such abuse is stoic, even humble:

if somebody, a member of the public is abusive towards you it is not very nice, but you just take it on the chin and go on your way (SC2).

You get abuse and that, you know, but you've just got to bow your head because it'll be me losing my job, not them. (L1).



**Table 1** Discursive themes on hierarchic esteem based on selective social comparison

First-order themes	Second-order categories	Evidence from interviews
Employment status	Self-reliance	At least I'm working and I could be on the dole [unemployed] (D6) At the end of the day I'm making money, some of them [the unemployed] is not, do you know what I mean? A steady wage and they're not. They are on the dole, they've got to go and sign giro's or whatever it is they do, I don't know, because I've never been on it like, but they've got to sign things and do this, that and the other (L1)
Physical capital	Self-esteem	People will turn around and say 'ah that job is a piece of piss, it's a doddle [easy]' but then when they try it maybe some of them have only lasted a day or two days 'oh I cannot do this' so, you know. It is a hard job like (L17)
	Masculine resilience	No, I know half of them wouldn't last 2 min. I've seen it for myself. We've had lads on the agency who have come, they've been on a day man and then the next day they've never turned in (D5)
	Heroic endurance	Work outside in the fresh air (SC18) Not 'standing in a stupid, stinking factory all day (L1) Stuck on a machine all day (L11) Having to work 'just like a robot (D6)
Employment conditions	Work environment	You're sort of like your own boss once you are out of the yard because everybody knows their own job, what they've got to do you know. The gaffers [managers] are like spot on, they just leave you if you are actually doing your work (D7)
Intra-occupational esteem	Limited supervision	I mean, we are going around streets with, what, 26 tonne wagons what are built for horses and carts. And people have got their cars parked there and you're trying to scrape past a car and a lamppost and there are times when you go through gaps and when you go through you are crushing midgies [small flies] (D4)
	Relative physical prowess	You've always got obstructions and it's making you think 'can I get in there, or can I prove to the lads that I can when they are watching your back'. You know, with the banksman course, 'no don't try there' 'wey [well] if you stand a bit further back, watch this side and lead me to there I'll get in', 'wey [well] how do you know?' 'because I know the width of the wagon, I'll get in', 'will you?', I says 'watch', I says 'if I'm going to hit just stop us'. And 9 out of 10 I get in because I know the width of the wagon, I just have to look and 'I'll get in there'. .... and old people come out 'I wish I could do that with my car and you can do the bugger with a wagon'. You know? (D9)
	Relative skills	I mean like I just said on the bins you have to be young, you have to be young for the stamina because them bins are heavy when you pull them (SC19) You know, we all started on the bins and when the bins start getting too much, because it's a young man's game now. It's not like it was, now you've got these lads running (SC3)

In this sense, the work was also socially dirty in so far as garbage workers quietly accepted abuse from members of the public who were felt to look down on workers where the latter apparently failed to 'serve' the needs of the former. As many workers put it, 'you are just there to be abused, basically' (WA2). A preparedness to 'take it on your chin' or to 'bow your head' suggested a deepening of the subservience associated with social taint (Ashforth and Kreiner 1999) that could further erode social esteem as part of dignity at work (Bolton 2007). This is reminiscent of Cassell and Bishop's (2014) discussion of taxi drivers and the manner in which negative public ascriptions impacted on their sense of esteem. This denial of social esteem was exacerbated by a perception that the public defined garbage workers as unintelligent—as 'daft lads' and 'thickies' who were only fit to empty bins. As one worker commented, the public think that if you are going out litter picking, 'they think that you've got no brains, you are just illiterate'

(SC8) or that you are 'thick as pig shit.' (D4). To be positioned as unintelligent is to be exposed to both identity threat and a further diminution of dignity in so far as it affects a sense of social worth and value.

In the above ways, garbage collector talk revealed associations with physical and social taint that threatened their sense of dignity at work. Such talk suggested that garbage collectors were to be avoided, ignored or even abused. Routinely suffering individual and collective denials of worth threatened to reduce the dignity attributed to them through the judgements of others. This then is the everyday context within which garbage workers sought to construct their own accounts of positive identity and dignity. Positioned as 'scum' (D5) the 'lowest of the low' (L1/SC20) and 'lower than a snake's belly' (WA1) they nevertheless narrated accounts of dignity that spoke to an everyday-heroic sense of self-rooted in a narrowly defined masculinity premised on what we identify as

discourses of affirmation, hierarchic esteem and paternalistic care.

## Accounts of Everyday Heroism

In masculine terms, heroism is most readily associated with notions of strength, competition, competence, hierarchy, power and endurance (Connell 1995; Andersson 2008). In organisational terms, this translates into stories of leaders who apparently rescue failing companies (e.g. Steve Jobs and Apple), build empires from the ground up (e.g. Branson and Virgin) or forge new ground in established industries (e.g. Roddick and Body Shop). In this sense, heroism is more readily associated with those at the top of our organisations and located in a masculine concern with expertise and the ability to command (Connell 1995). Clearly, the distance that separates these captains of industry from garbage workers is considerable in occupational, hierarchical and indeed material terms. And yet, our workers offer accounts that are heroic in their own terms. As considered in detail below, these accounts centre on practices of reframing, recalibration and affirmation; differentiation through hierarchic esteem, and paternalistic care.

### Reframing, Recalibrating and Affirming

Ashforth and Kreiner (1999) observe that classically dirty workers seek to transform the meaning of their stigmatised work by 'reframing' the way in which their labours are seen by concealing the negative aspects through processes of *infusion* or *negation*. This involves imbuing the stigmatised aspect of their work with positive value or negating the negative connotations. The examples offered include prostitutes claiming they are offering a therapeutic service rather than selling their bodies, or debt collectors stating that they are simply doing their job (Ashforth and Kreiner 1999). Garbage workers entered into such practices in so far as they stressed the positive environmental impact of their recycling work, the cleanliness of their wagons, and the enduring necessity of garbage work: 'there has always got to be a bin man' (D1), 'somebody has got to do the job' (Supervisor), and 'the way I see it, it's a job that has got to be done' (SC14).

And yet, narratives on the 'necessity' of garbage work went beyond most observed accounts of reframing. There was, in a very real sense, a claiming of dirt and their association with dirt as part of what we identify as a positive affirmation of their association with dirt and with the dirty particulars of the occupation:

Well a lot of people sort of denigrate what we do and to be honest I don't think that's fair, I think that not

just the street cleaning but the refuse side and all that, I mean I've lived in [town name] now since I came back from [elsewhere] in the mid 80s and I think the people [garbage workers] put a lot of hard work in and they are serving their own area, they are serving their own peers if you like, the public, it's a very worthwhile thing to do. People say is it demeaning to walk around and pick litter up especially when I walk around my own village and people speak to me and I'll say 'no, I don't think it is'... I don't see it like that at all, it's a very worthwhile occupation (SC18).

This claiming of the association with dirt and dirty work is subtly different to processes of *negation* and *infusion* (Ashforth and Kreiner 1999) in that it is not based on an attempt to override or conceal the dirty particulars of the task. Rather, these particulars are accepted and their value affirmed: 'it's an essential service to the public. If we didn't do it then the place would be knee deep in litter' (SC2). Thus, although our interviewees recognised that taint is commonly attached to their work, they seemed able to 'enjoy a "necessity shield"' (Ashforth and Kreiner 2014, p. 84) through ascribing value to their work precisely because of the job they do. This suggests that whatever stigma is or has been attached to doing the job, or no matter the level of public regard towards them, they can potentially experience dignity by reframing their contact with dirt in terms of its social significance and worth. In essence, they actively claim the role as our 'agents' of dirty work (Hughes 1962). In this sense, *affirmation* stands as a subset of *reframing* along with *infusion* and *negation*.

This is not to say the garbage workers entirely avoided discourses that downplayed or recast their associations with dirt. Affirmation was often accompanied by classic examples of that which Ashforth and Kreiner (1999) label 'recalibrating'. Talk that recalibrates associations with dirt seeks to magnify the redeeming qualities of an occupation in an attempt to encourage others to overlook the dirty particulars. As noted above, for our workers these practices revolved around talk of recycling, well-being and environmental value:

To be honest I mean, you just have to look where it has got to go, you've got to do it [recycling] because you're running out of places to put all the rubbish. That's just common knowledge that. You have got to do something, you've got to try and stop land fill and that you know (SL).

Yeah. It is a good thing. You've got to try and do your bit and the recycling is saving on costs for the council because every time you put, a wagon will fetch in anyway 12 tonne for half a day, every time that goes into the tip the council pays for it to be

buried. ... It's good that way, plus, you know, you can reuse it (L15).

Talk of recycling and the environment speak to more contemporary and perhaps noble activities than lifting garbage. In the above quotes, the emphasis is on taking action, public service and a growing concern with our responsibilities to recycle: 'you are trying to clean up the environment as well, you know? Especially with the recycling you are trying to do what you can.' (L15). Coupled with the imperative to save the Council and the taxpayer money, this speaks to small acts of heroism in so far as everyday actions might contribute to cleaning up the environment and reducing 'filth and disease' (L15). This is in Connell's (1995, p. 45) terms a masculine narrative of heroism that proceeds 'from men's bodies' and 'drives or directs action'. It speaks to the ability of workers to act and to make a difference—'it's an important job'.

Practices of reframing, affirming and recalibrating serve to reposition the labour of the garbage worker as heroic in everyday terms. Theirs is a necessary job that contributes to the prevention of disease, the maintenance of communities, husbanding scarce resources and saving the environment. When combined with their stoicism in the face of public abuse, these narratives begin to construct a 'heroic masculine persona' based on 'describing the self in terms of key elements of what it means to be a man, such as courageous, physically tough and able to keep one's cool' (Andersson 2008, p. 142). This persona is enhanced through practices of selective hierarchical comparison.

## Hierarchic Esteem

Garbage workers did not see themselves as an undifferentiated mass. They understood themselves to stand apart from those who would not or could not do their work. Just as importantly, they identified different role, skill and status attributes that served to increase and assert the dignity of individual workers. In hierarchical terms, garbage workers put themselves above those who were unemployed or who left the occupation because they could not cope with its physical, social and symbolic demands. In that sense, there is a stigmatisation of hierarchy (Grandy 2008) as they view themselves as less tainted and more legitimate than these others. Acknowledging that many people held them in low regard, and that the job was tainted, a common response was to stress the point that they *had* a job. For example, one driver stated 'At least I'm working and I could be on the dole [unemployed]' (D6). In relation to this a number of interviewees commented that the job meant they brought home a wage and, for example, allowed them to afford family holidays. Such self-reliance was felt to place garbage collectors above those who relied on state welfare alone:

At the end of the day I'm making money, some of them [the unemployed] is not, do you know what I mean? A steady wage and they're not. They are on the dole, they've got to go and sign giro's or whatever it is they do, I don't know, because I've never been on it like, but they've got to sign things and do this, that and the other (L1).

Autonomy and self-reliance are evident in the contention that having a job and the income that goes with it means the garbage worker is not compelled to 'sign on' for state welfare payments. In this sense, earning an income is a source of dignity in so far as it is indicative of autonomy and self-reliance (Sayer 2007b). Moreover, dignity arose from knowledge of the challenges that the job presented—challenges with which others could not cope:

People will turn around and say 'ah that job is a piece of piss, it's a doddle [easy]' but then when they try it maybe some of them have only lasted a day or two days 'oh I cannot do this' so, you know. It is a hard job like (L17).

No, I know half of them wouldn't last 2 minutes. I've seen it for myself. We've had lads on the agency who have come, they've been on a day man and then the next day they've never turned in (D5).

In viewing the job as a 'doddle', interviewees stressed that outsiders were ignorant about the weight of bins, the number of bins emptied in a day, the distance bins were pulled and the amount of miles that loaders and street cleaners walked each day. Thus, self-esteem can be identified based on the possession of a job, and the possession of a job that others could not do. As observed elsewhere (Slutskaya et al. 2016) such narratives feed into displays of masculine resilience, as well as heroic endurance where lesser 'others' fail to endure the physical rigours of the job. To be employed, self-reliant and hard working placed collectors above the unemployed and failed garbage workers: a status that allowed talk of self-worth and respect.

Talk of comparative worth indicated the garbage collectors constructed a hierarchy of esteem that placed them above those who did not work. This hierarchy was extended to other occupational groups. Favourable comparisons were made in respect of those such as factory workers. Collectors mentioned that not working in a factory was one of the best things about the job as they were able to 'work outside in the fresh air' (SC18), were not 'standing in a stupid, stinking factory all day' (L1), 'stuck on a machine all day' (L11), having to work 'just like a robot' (D6). Where other lower status occupations such as factory workers are often characterised as subject to close supervision (Bolton and Houlihan 2009) garbage workers were

relatively autonomous—they had 'no one breathing down your neck' (D8). Some even claimed that when working they were their 'own boss really' (SC13):

you're sort of like your own boss once you are out of the yard because everybody knows their own job, what they've got to do you know. The gaffers [managers] are like spot on, they just leave you if you are actually doing your work (D7).

These comments suggest a resonance with dignity since they infer a degree of practical autonomy, a criterion often cited as central to experiencing dignity (Hodson 2001; Sayer 2007a). Practical autonomy was also suggested by our interviewees in relation to how they undertook their job, including deciding whether to drive a wagon down streets where cars had parked inappropriately, deciding whether a bin was contaminated and whether to take extra bags of rubbish left beside bins. The ability to make task decisions contributed to garbage collection being described as a 'canny [good] job' (D1) infused with certain types of autonomy and status. How that autonomy was deployed depended in part on the perceived respect with which members of the public interacted with workers. In large measure this centred on acknowledging the worker's presence and discretionary authority.

So, garbage collectors placed themselves above those who relied upon the state financially, above those who failed to stick at garbage collection, above other manual workers, and also above those who were more tightly controlled, supervised and surveyed in the course of their work (e.g. factory workers). They effectively engaged in a process of selective social comparison (Ashforth and Kreiner 1999; Slutskaya et al. 2016) as part of a masculine concern to raise themselves up a preferred hierarchical order (Connell 1995). This establishment of a preferred hierarchical order was also extended by an intra-occupational identification of esteem differences based on the relative physical prowess and skills of drivers, collectors and road sweepers. Drivers were esteemed for their vehicular manoeuvring skills, while loaders were esteemed for their physicality. The street labourers were the least esteemed.

For their part, drivers stressed that the job required both knowledge (certified in the award of a heavy goods licence) and skill. The latter was asserted through stories of competence as witnessed and commented upon by others:

I mean, we are going around streets with, what, 26 tonne wagons what are built for horses and carts. And people have got their cars parked there and you're trying to scrape past a car and a lamppost and there are times when you go through gaps and when you go through you are crushing midgies [small flies] (D4).

you've always got obstructions and it's making you think 'can I get in there, or can I prove to the lads that I can when they are watching your back'. You know, with the banksman course, 'no don't try there' 'wey [well] if you stand a bit further back, watch this side and lead me to there I'll get in', 'wey [well] how do you know?' 'because I know the width of the wagon, I'll get in', 'will you?', I says 'watch', I says 'if I'm going to hit just stop us'. And 9 out of 10 I get in because I know the width of the wagon, I just have to look and 'I'll get in there'. .... and old people come out 'I wish I could do that with my car and you can do the bugger with a wagon'. You know? (D9).

Driving under such circumstances is presented as heroic in so far as drivers achieve that which others deem difficult or impossible. As leaders of the wagon they 'prove to the lads' that they have the courage and competence to fit through impossible gaps. The physicality of the process is announced in terms of mastering '26 tonne wagons' while old people applaud their skill and 'wish I could do that'. Esteem therefore flows from others (workers and public) towards the driver. We see something similar in respect of the physical prowess of loaders.

The loaders' main skill claims related to the banksman training they had undertaken, and which they described as necessary both to understand the wagon's safety features and to direct the driver when reversing. However, where they garnered esteem from others was in their physical speed, strength and stamina. Street cleaners, such as those cited below, would acknowledge that the work of a loader was much more physically demanding than their own and required a strength and stamina far beyond what was required by the street cleaners. It was notable that street cleaners were able to empathise with both the challenges and value of such work in part because many of them had held such positions years previously. This invoked references to loading being a younger person's role:

I mean like I just said on the bins you have to be young, you have to be young for the stamina because them bins are heavy when you pull them (SC19).

You know, we all started on the bins and when the bins start getting too much, because it's a young man's game now. It's not like it was, now you've got these lads running (SC3).

The same kind of pride in physical prowess, in stamina and in running was also observed in Slutskaya et al.'s (2016) study of bin-men in the south of England. In both cases, accounts of physical effort stand as an attempt to construct masculinity as a certain type of embodied performance. Strength and skill are sources of pride and, we would argue, arenas for the display of everyday acts of



heroism. They also feed a desire for social comparison through which dignity is secured via selective social comparison with those worse-off (Ashforth and Kreiner 1999; Slutskaya et al. 2016) so as to claim superiority in terms of courage, autonomy, skill, leadership, income and strength.

There are then echoes of Grandy's (2008) hierarchy of stigma through which subjects established their relative worth. However, while the hierarchy of stigma is premised on the denigration of those 'lower down' the occupational and societal chain, hierarchic esteem offers praise to those above. Specifically, the tendency of street cleaners to praise the physical stamina of loaders, and loaders to acknowledge the spatial skills of drivers points to the projection of positive status differentials to those up the chain. This upwards projection of 'hierarchic esteem' is then the positive counterpart of the negative hierarchy of stigma. Both are aimed at securing differential status in respect of the 'other' and both can, as in this case, operate at the same time. What the addition of hierarchic esteem reveals is that such processes of differentiation in respect of dirty workers need not be framed in dismissive or derisory terms. Dirty workers can and do see the value of other occupational members and, on such basis, are willing to elevate the status of the other. This elevation can be directed at individuals or, as in the case of paternalistic care (below) the occupation as a whole.

### Paternalistic Care

Discourses of affirmation and hierarchic esteem afford two related bases for the construction of everyday heroism. They rescue a sense of individual and collective worth in the face of stigma, abuse and ambivalence. They acclaim the value of working with dirt, of contributing to society, and of differentiated selves based on self-reliance, autonomy, skill and physicality. The third and final discourse of everyday heroism rested on a paternalistic notion of being prepared to care.

Talk of care centred on explicit claims to improving people's lives. On occasions, this was expressed as responses to specific calls for help:

... we help everybody. It doesn't matter who it is, you know, if they come to us and say 'my wife has had an accident, she can't pull the bin out, she's broke her leg, would you please come in and get the bin?' We'd say 'no problem'. We'd go in and get the bin, we'll put it back and they'll just come out and say 'right' but then you get a message in the office [from them] saying 'thank you very much for your help' (L16).

In the above example, garbage workers demonstrate a willingness to go the extra mile in response to the needs of

others. At other times, care is reflected in the practice of 'looking out' for vulnerable members of the community:

the older people, we just look after the older people. I mean, we'll go and there will be nobody there and you'll think 'well, where is the old lady at?' and you'll look through the window and this old wife came out and said 'what are you looking through my window for?' and I said 'well, to see that you're not on the floor' and she says 'well, why?' and I said 'wey [well], we haven't seen you for a fortnight' and she says 'well, I've been on holiday' and I says 'oh, righto then, tell us next time will you?' (L12).

This is a strongly paternalistic approach to care in which surveillance ('you'll look through the window') is employed to protect those identified as vulnerable. There is sense in which the observation is on-going ('we haven't seen you in a fortnight') and even asserts a need to conform to some sense of authority in so far as those 'looked' after are asked to 'tell us next time' you go away. Wittingly or not, the care thus offered speaks to a masculine tradition in which dependants are dominated by a father (Connell 1995) who repays obedience with paternal affection and attention (Gillis 2016). More positively, it also suggests a willingness to rise above self-interest to keep an eye on the bigger picture in respect of the family or community of which one is a part (Hanlon 2012). This in turn is linked to heroic stories of the ways in which refuse collectors rescue others through their willingness to care:

Well, there was a crew that was in the [news]paper last year when an old woman fell down on the street in the snow, they helped her up and helped her to the door and then got the ambulance there and they were in the [news]paper about them and that (D4).

Such talk served to construct the garbage worker as ethical or virtuous in their own right. By going beyond both the requirements of their job and the public perceptions that might limit them, workers were able to narrate a sphere of caring activity through which they asserted their own moral worth and autonomy. While we might expect narratives of care in the dirty work of nurses or care assistants [see, for example, Chiapetta-Swanson (2005) and Stacey (2005)] it is less obviously the domain of garbage workers. Yet, and in opposition to public slights and abuse, garbage workers laid claim to caring. Albeit limited in scope, their account of care chimes with popular notions of heroic masculinity wherein public interventions and displays of protective paternalism safeguard others (Godfrey and Hamad 2012) especially those who, in physical terms, are disadvantaged. In this sense, while discourses centred on *affirmation* and *recalibration* served to construct a sense of dignity based on an internal



appreciation of the value inherent in their work, the final discourse of paternalistic care projected a heroic sense in which workers were willing to go beyond expectations to tend to the needs of more vulnerable others.

Overall, our analysis of garbage collector talk reveals that dignity at work is not just a product of trying to overlook the dirty particulars of a task (e.g. recalibration) but also a product of actively affirming the value associated with dealing with dirt, and the construction of a hierarchy of esteem that rescues a sense of identity from ascriptions of undifferentiated matter. Not only do garbage workers place themselves above other manual labourers and the unemployed, they also assert intra-occupational status differences based on the skills and demands associated with particular jobs. In this sense, denials of dignity stemmed not from the physically dirty nature of the job tasks per se, by the negative ascriptions, confrontations and denials of worth that arose in the course of garbage collection. Physical and social taint combined to position the garbage worker as intellectually deficient, uncooperative, physically stained and socially tainted. And yet, from this meagre occupational soil garbage workers nurtured quiet claims to a form of everyday masculine heroism.

## Concluding Discussion

The physical demands, smells and sights combine to make garbage collection an exemplar dirty work job. Together with the verbal abuse from sections of the public, it also means that experiencing dignity can be difficult and therefore is a job many are glad not to undertake. In that context, the main focus of this paper has been to discuss whether dignity can be experienced in a job that carries strong physical taint. Importantly, analysis of garbage collector talk also revealed the ways in which social taint arises from external ascriptions of low intelligence and low worth. The paper has therefore attempted to advance our understanding of 'the ways workers try to carve meaning and respect from often very poor soil' (Strangleman 2006, p. 182). In that context, while the garbage collectors described a number of deprivations which they experience as part of the job, their talk also strongly suggested that they are able to experience workplace dignity. This suggests that dignity can be imported into jobs even though they are stigmatised through the physical and social taint associated with the work undertaken. Furthermore, we illustrate the ways in which dignity is not that which is simply given or taken by outsiders (i.e. employers, customers, publics) but is, importantly, something that can be discursively constructed from within an occupational grouping. This builds on work by, amongst others, Lucas et al. (2013), Cassell and Bishop (2014) and Perry (1998)

who all suggest that those who undertake dirty work discursively construct degrees of dignity.

By affirming the necessity and worth of working with dirt, by reorienting our understanding of dirty work in terms of care of the environment and the vulnerable, and by constructing an inter-occupational hierarchy of stigmatisation (Grandy 2008) and an intra-occupational hierarchy of esteem, those who labour in what others see as low-status occupations assert a sense of value, self-worth and self-respect that has been identified as essential to workplace dignity (Hodson 2001; Bolton 2007). However, in contra-distinction to Grandy and Maven's (2014) point concerning the considerable effort often required to attain dignity, the garbage collectors did not seem to have to work hard at attaining dignity. Their talk instead suggested that being dignified came relatively easy to them. One reason why this may have been the case was that they were able to construct their work within the norms of masculinity, producing a 'heroic masculine persona' (Andersson 2008) signifying courage, physical toughness, resilience and paternalistic care.

In the terms of the three discourses, the dignity which we have argued was evident in the garbage collectors' talk is shaped in part by social roots (Fairclough 2003) which, from the perspective of the workers, have cast them as lowly through the taints associated with their work and the resultant stigmatisation. The potential for a denial of dignity is therefore a strong influence on the discourses which we identify. While an outsider might consider their job predominantly in relation to the dirt, smells and unpleasant sights, the garbage collectors instead provided a different narrative which included important points about the necessary requirement for such a job, and in turn the job's social significance. We consider this constitutive of a strong sense of social value. Indeed, their heroic discourse of care of the public in general and the vulnerable in particular can be viewed as part of an attempt to construct the dirty worker as ethical and virtuous in their own right.

Workers also talked about their job in highly positive ways and contended that it was a job beyond the wit and capability of many. This we argued was constitutive of a sense of self-esteem, which was developed by workers to construct an intra- and inter-occupational hierarchy of worth. This hierarchy separated garbage collectors from other manual occupations and each other as part of a process of naming and claiming individual worth. The three inter-related discourses help us appreciate how they view their job as something of personal and social value and, as such, deserving of recognition and respect.

Finally, in viewing their job in a positive light, it can be argued that the garbage collectors found many aspects of the job self-fulfilling. This was the case even though they recognised that much of their job was unpleasant. Here, we

stress that this is not to suggest neither that we should not emphasise the materiality of their physical taint (Hughes et al. 2017) nor forego a progressive form of politics and social policy that seeks to improve workers' experience. Instead it is suggesting that in relation to Sayer's (2007b) contrast between terms that are usually positively and negatively related to dignity, the garbage collectors' talk suggests that experiencing dignity does not necessarily entail neat binaries or an erosion of the negative terms. From our analysis of their talk, it is the case that they ascribe the negative terms to themselves, on the basis of how sections of the public view them. The verbal abuse and lack of intelligence, together with the other terms which they reported in relation to how the public perceive them would, in Sayer's terms, negatively relate to dignity. Although Sayer notes that both negative and positive terms used to describe experiencing dignity or not, 'are fuzzy and shade into one another' (2007b, p. 567), the garbage collectors seemed to clearly acknowledge the existence of the negative terms and this seemed important to them in being able to construct an alternative counter-narrative that imbues them and their work with a positive heroic meaning. We suspect that the same is true of other occupational groupings. Moreover, our account of hierarchic esteem suggests that such meaning-making is not the preserve of 'high status' occupations, but is also a practice that is enacted by those cast in more lowly positions pursuant to taking back a sense of dignity.

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